

Hark! The Guarded Humans Sing

Do you think angels are as fascinated with us as we are with them? Do they have our pictures on mugs, T-shirts, calendars, decorative plates? Do they have museums full of grand and glorious paintings of us? Seminars and books on "Getting Through to Your Guarded Human?" Songs like "Hark, the Guarded Humans Sing?" That would be a nice one for them at this time of year – mostly the guarded humans are bumbling along, driving in their cars, running errands, worried about all kinds of ridiculous nonsense, watching TV – but at Christmas, Hark! The Guarded Humans Sing!!

Some see pop culture's fascination with angels as the sign of a recent great resurgence of spirituality. But images of heavenly spirits have been at the very essence of the collective unconscious for centuries – paintings, sculpture, songs, drama, poetry, architecture, film, not to mention hundreds and hundreds of websites. Who are these spiritual beings that have so captivated humanity?

In the Bible, there is not a lot specifically about angels – they're part of the landscape. They drop in and out to deliver messages (the word 'angel' actually means 'messenger') and guide people the way God wants them to go, and intervene in the occasional impending disaster, but Biblical angels definitely don't fit the modern profile of the Guardian Angel as Loving Protector Who Will Always Shield You From Everything You Don't Like. If you read only the Bible, you would probably not want to experience an angelic presence. They appear

in horrific visions, they made Isaiah eat a coal, picked Jeremiah up by the hair, freaked Ezekiel out completely, wreaked havoc on poor Moses' peaceful and unassuming little life, and when they appear, they don't descend in a pastel cloud of Windham Hill music to protect you from something you don't want to have to face – they usually have some awe-inspiring, monumental, life-altering task for you to take on – suffice it to say there is a good reason that the angels in the Bible always appear saying, “Fear Not!” Biblical angels are not the “best friend perfect mommy glows in your favorite color” angels of the New Age.

The traditional Church developed the theme of Guardian Angels, created by God and placed in Heaven, of which we each get one, whose job it is to guide us toward God and protect us from the Devil all our lives. St. Jerome supposedly said “The dignity of a soul is so great that each has a guardian angel from its birth.” By the time that Swedenborg wrote, the prevailing ecclesiastical view on angels was of a complicated divine bureaucratic hierarchy of agents of God, executing God's will here on earth, kind of using us as pawns. A Catholic website I looked at used the metaphor of a Heavenly Army Under God's Command. Sounds like a Heavenly DMV to me.

Swedenborg, who has probably written more about angels than any other author, took a radical departure from the contemporary prevailing views of angels as a different race of divine creatures that God made and put in Heaven. Angels play a very central role in Swedenborgian theology, he says that “The

Lord's Divine Providence has for its object a heaven from the human race," that we are angels in training, using our earthly life experience to learn to choose the Divine Community over the Material world of Self Alone. He says – and this is one of my favorites – that we each have four spirits with us at all times – two Divine angels (a Love one and a Wisdom one) and two Hellish spirits (one for selfish intentions and one for false perceptions).. Swedenborg's experience of Divine angels and Hellish spirits was that they are the spiritual bodies our materials bodies separate from at death, and that all angels have lived on the earth as people. Think about that – angels loved the earth, watched sunsets, listened to the waves, fell in love. God works through these former people to guide humanity.

In the Swedenborgian view, angels comprise our spiritual companionship, which we choose by our states of mind and heart and soul. You know how you want to keep your kids from hanging out with companions who are, shall we say, "less than truly inspirational"? How you want to involve your kids in activities where they will make friends with other kids who spark their creativity and happiness? The same is true for our spiritual companionship, The activities we involve ourselves in and the states of mind we cling to in life gravitate us toward different kinds of spiritual companionship. Angels are not separate beings that swoop in from overhead to control us from above. They are the spiritual qualities we attract as our spirits grow toward God. Angels are

wisdom and compassion and love and creativity. They are friendship and fun and music and inspiration. And our relationship with them is two-way – we generate spiritual qualities, and the embodiments of these qualities, in turn, lead us along; it feeds on itself. Swedenborgian theologian Robert Kirven says, “angels inspire us with good affections, so that we will intend and accomplish things that improve our human communities.” Another writer, John O’Donohue, expresses a Swedenborgian perspective of angels when he writes, “In a certain sense, your angel is the voice and presence of ancient divine longings within you. This urges you forth from all false belonging until you come into the divine rhythm where longing and belonging are one.”

Hearing angels, listening to them, is not a matter of summoning them through channeling, performing a ritual so that a real good one will appear, or hanging up a picture and saying “this one is my angel.” It is not the angels we seek, it is God, whose will they manifest. In Buddhist tradition, spiritual writings, practices and teachings are seen as “the finger that points at the moon,” and our task is to see the moon, not worship the finger. Do not confuse the messenger with the message. So how do we connect with our spiritual companions? How do we hear them, how do we know them, and what do we do when we have heard them? Think about how they appeared around the birth of the Christ Child, how they brought the central message of this season,

which is not Glory or Salvation or Eternal Life (that's Easter), but simply Hope. It's Christmas. All we've got is a baby. Hope. Mystery. Infinite Possibility.

Angels appeared, not to prophets this time, not to potential leaders like Moses, but to the working man – the shepherd. They did not appear in a blaze of saving glory in the middle of the town square at noon, when the most people would see them and be awed -- they came at night, in darkness, in stillness, in silence. And it was not the angels who saved the day – they announced the birth of hope. In the light and joy and singing and fellowship and love and celebration of this season, we forget that this is a time of year of darkness and stillness for the earth's seasons, a time when life retreats into silence. It's especially easy to forget that here in California, where we aren't confronted with a view of the frozen, barren, field that used to be florid corn and will not be thick with sunflowers for several more months. According to O'Donohue, "the sacred has both a silence and a secrecy around it...the very nature of angelic presence is totally alien to the garish, neon attention it has been given."

We hear the angels in a place within us that Thomas Merton calls the "pointe vierge," the virgin point, "a point untouched by illusion, a point of pure truth...which belongs entirely to God, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will." The "pointe vierge" is beyond the commonplace experience of relaxation or a few moments of peace and quiet at last, or even the calm and comfort we feel in Church. The Pointe Vierge

is the ultimate depth of the rarest profound moments of prayer or meditation, when we set our selves aside and stand in awe before the Mystery. It is at this point that we, like Mary, realize that it is God who fills us, not with promises of an eternally happy Heaven, but with hope, with faith in God's glory and our part in co-creating it, even when we don't know yet what promise and mystery this seed within us holds. Perhaps it is at the Pointe Vierge that we can fully understand the meaning of the Virgin Birth, that each one of us brings something into the world that no one else can bring, something we receive in darkness and silence, and bring forth into the light of life. And this is why God saw fit to protect each one of us with a guardian angel.

So, the Christmas season is about clearing out the clutter in our souls, even before we have something to replace it with. Get rid of the old emotions that no longer fit, the dusty boxes of feelings we have been saving for a rainy day, the worldviews we once held, and keep only for sentimental or decorative reasons. Prepare the fields for spring. Make room for the angels. Irish poet Denis Devlin says, "it is inside our life that the angel happens." It is a time of year to keep the stillness and darkness of the shepherds' night within us, even while we are playing with our kids, and cooking, and answering the doorbell to friends, and sending cards and wrapping gifts.

There is a moment at the Solstice, when the earth is farthest away from the sun, one instant when the pendulum swing is at the zenith of its darkness, and then it moves back into orbit toward the light. It is at this moment, where Hope collides with Fear, that we hear the angels – not their trumpets, not their heavenly choirs, not their message of transformation and liberation, but the simple, “Fear not” that lets us know we are not alone.